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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR CALLS ON THE MUFTI

Summary

[11.](#) (U) On October 3, the Ambassador paid an initial courtesy call on Sevko Omerbasic, Mufti of Zagreb and Croatia. Omerbasic, an educator and known moderate, has been quoted in the press as being critical of U.S. actions in Iraq. When asked if there had been any efforts to promote extremism in Croatia, Omerbasic emphatically said "no," and assured us that extremist views are unlikely to be found among the small and moderate Muslim population of Croatia. In a wide-ranging meeting, Omerbasic struck a balanced and progressive tone, thanked the U.S. Mission for a recent donation to a Muslim community, and indicated a desire for further close contact with the Embassy. End Summary.

A Face of Progressive Islam

[12.](#) (U) On October 3 the Ambassador paid an introductory call on Sevko Omerbasic, Mufti of Zagreb and Croatia. Ahmed Ikanovic, Secretary of the Islamic Community in Croatia, and Mirsad Srebrnikovic, President of the Islamic Center, joined in what was a productive and informative meeting. Omerbasic estimated the size of the Islamic community of Croatia to be well over the official figure of 70,000 and nearly double its pre-war size. He described the Community's successes in education, and detailed their plans to develop a university and increase social services, such as establishing a pre-school and home for retirees.

[13.](#) (U) Omerbasic spoke of the September 11 attack on the United States and the tremendous damage it caused to the reputation of Islam. He noted that there were "irrational" responses to the attack, including some from religious leaders in the United States, but assured us that he believed religious leaders had a responsibility to promote peace, reconciliation, and tolerance.

[14.](#) (SBU) Omerbasic said he was energetically against Croatia sending troops to Iraq out of fear of a backlash against Muslims in Croatia from the majority Roman Catholic population should a Croatian soldier be wounded or killed. He urged us to seek alliances with Arab nations -- such as Egypt -- who could supply Arab troops who would then take the lead in rebuilding of Iraq. He expressed concern that every additional U.S. soldier killed in Iraq will serve only to worsen American views of Islam and the Arab world. However, he confided to us that on Saddam personally, he would have done the same as the U.S. and Great Britain. He said it was not lost on him or others that only after Saddam's fall did he proclaim himself a religious person. The Ambassador noted Croatia's desire to enter Euro-Atlantic alliances and the European Union, and spoke of the responsibility of all democratic nations to play a role in the defense of democracy and the fight against terrorism. The Mufti stated further that he supported the Government's decision to send police to Afghanistan -- noting that the Taliban had little to do with Islam.

[15.](#) (U) In September, on one of his first trips outside Zagreb, the Ambassador donated \$13,000, including books, computers, a photocopy machine, and sporting equipment to the primary school and Muslim Community Center in the village of Maljevac. South of Zagreb in a hard-hit war-affected area, Maljevac is one of a series of small impoverished villages with a large Muslim population along the border with Bosnia-Herzegovina. Omerbasic said he visited the village just after the Ambassador, and saw for himself the donations and the effect they were having on the community. He praised the donation as a symbol of the United States as a nation based on justice and the rule of law. He portrayed Islam as a positive and progressive force, and by so doing aligned himself as a democrat in support of the same principles as the United States.

Comment

[16.](#) (SBU) While he seemed at times reluctant to venture too deeply into domestic politics -- saying the Government did

not seek his views -- he nonetheless felt comfortable enough to discuss a broad range of issues, from the Middle East to the upcoming elections. He was extremely positive about the current government, calling its policy toward religious minorities "revolutionary" -- and expressed hope that there would be "continuity" in the Government beyond elections expected this fall. We found the discussion fruitful, and

will seek additional opportunities for the larger Embassy community to engage Omerbasic and his staff on issues of mutual concern.

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